

Testimony of JoAnne Wilcox
In Support of Raised Bill 7018: An Act Concerning Alternative Education

To the chairpersons and members of the Education Committee, I submit this testimony on behalf of the families and children who find themselves involved in alternative schools, in support of Raised Bill 7018.

My name is JoAnne Wilcox, and I am a New Haven mom of three. I have spoken to this committee only one other time, so forgive my nervousness. I am here to represent my son, who was expelled from a New Haven public school for 180 days, spent time, unsuccessfully, in Homebound, and now attends New Light High School, an alternative school in New Haven run by Principal Larry Conaway. Mr. Conaway knows that I am here to support his program, and asked that I remind you that a full time staff, committed to troubled teens, is high on his list of needs. He currently runs his program with a staff shared with another program in the area. Both schools loose out when the staff can't focus on connecting to their own community.

As I read Bill 7018, I found myself confused by some of the items that seemed arbitrarily thrown in there. Cleaning supplies and air quality? I took for granted that anyone would have to be told to have a nice space and a clean environment. But then I thought back to the dilapidated locations of the Homebound site and the previous address of New Light High School, which was in a rundown strip mall, with low ceilings, thin walls, no technology, few resources, and a palpable message that the best of teachers couldn't overcome, that these kids deserve nothing better.

Some still believe that punitive measures work. They want to see kids punished for their actions, and pay for their mistakes. Ok. We've seen what that looks like, the kids are taken out of regular school environments and given little resources because, they believe, that is what they deserve. We have come to see that as a pipeline to our prison system.

Bill 7018 seems to be inviting in the alternative. Disengaged kids are the toughest population to work with. Given the fact that they are often put in basements and dilapidated buildings, and given limited teaching and resources, I suggest we play out the alternative. What if, instead of punished, they were held accountable? What if, instead of being judged, the parents were helped with resources and training on keeping them connected and safe? What if they were to learn from their experience, and connect to a community that cared about their future? Some worry about creating a school that would be too inviting, but let that play itself out. What if, instead of given the least, they were given the most? What if they were given experiences that took them out of their elements, and challenged them? What would it look like, and how would it feel to be a teacher in a school that was helping kids truly engage in their education and futures? The dignified approach is to support these schools fully.

Bill 7018 should be passed because it builds structure around kids that need structure. It gives the teachers working with them the support they need to do their best to reengage, and get them thinking about their futures. It provides Mr. Conaway with the tools he needs to get his kids on the right track. It also addresses me, a mom with a tough kid, who's in the heart of her greatest struggle. We have to work together. I believe passing Bill 7018 is the right thing to do.

Respectfully Submitted,

JoAnne Wilcox